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# The American Student Abroad and the Perceived Impact in the Local Community

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE AMERICAN STUDENT ABROAD AND THE PERCEIVED IMPACT IN THE  
LOCAL COMMUNITY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY STUDIES

BY

EMILY GAUL

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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## ABSTRACT

The internationalization of higher education has contributed to the increase of American students studying abroad. Students studying abroad do have an impact the local host communities' social, economic and cultural traditions. Although, students may or may not be aware of the consequences, both negative and positive, of their impact. This research sought to examine the perceived impact by both alumni and local faculty of a small program in Tanzania. Alumni were reflective on their experience in regards to how they wavered between feeling like a tourist and feeling more connected to the community. Alumni and local faculty both felt that research projects could be more beneficial and involve community input to better serve the local community. Preparing students for their experience is most important, as is continual reflection over the course of the semester.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The Globalization of education is inevitable and one of the realities of the 21st century (Altbach & Knight, 2007). According to McCabe (2001), globalization is a process in which “standardization across cultures occurs as technology, migration and education become dispersed around the globe” (p. 140). According to Blass (2009), the globalization of education, specifically higher education has and continues to expand. Universities around the world are creating partnerships with foreign universities; encouraging faculty and student exchanges; funding international research collaborations; and setting up online virtual learning opportunities for people to access from anywhere on the global - all of which increase the global knowledge transfer (Blass, 2009). It is easy to conclude that globalization is the driving force of a shift in higher education policy and initiatives. As countries are reforming their higher education systems to react to the changing global conditions, internationalization plays an important role in contributing and leading the process of rethinking the social, cultural, and economic roles of higher education (Gopal, 2011).

This push for internationalization is a response to several global pressures including the ever-increasing global competitive workforce that students enter upon completion of their education (Gopal, 2011). Students need not only be able to contribute their knowledge, but also “comprehend, analyze and evaluate its meaning in the context of an

increasingly globalized world” (Brustein, 2007, p. 382). In order to produce students who are global minded and critical thinkers, higher education institutions are seeking ways in which to achieve these results by internationalizing the curriculum on-campus and increasing participation in cross-border programs such as study abroad (Parsons, 2010).

A substantial effort is made on cross-border initiatives, specifically in sending students abroad as part of their coursework. In 2013-14, nearly 289,000 American students participated in study-abroad programs, up from 141,000 in 1999-2000, which represents the most visible form of internationalization (IIE, 2014). The important combination of both on-campus preparation and reflection throughout the study abroad experience will greatly influence how the student benefits from their experience abroad, as well as how they see themselves in a global world. Simply speaking, going to another country opens a whole new world to a student but how they interpret and understand those views comes from how they were prepared on-campus for that experience. Additionally, American students go abroad with their own ideals, opinions, and biases. The effects of students carrying their own values are not necessarily good nor bad. The impact of this needs to be examined and taken into consideration as the study abroad field continues to grow and practitioners in the field look at making study abroad reciprocal and sustainable.

### **Problem Statement**

As a study abroad professional, I have seven years of experience working with students and local community members to organize study abroad programs as part of their college curriculum. The topic of how students impact their local host communities



emerged in conversations and site visits where I saw students immersing themselves at different levels. All of the programs I work with involve some sort of community-based research project that requires students to get out in the local community and, likely, interview people on their own topic of interest. All students complete training on protecting human subjects training and ethical research practices. I was most concerned with how students were approaching the local community members – were they aware of the positive and negative implications of their presence? And, how are these projects having a positive or negative impact on the local community? In doing preliminary research, there is little published research on the topic of the impact of American students abroad and I seek to contribute to this important aspect in the study abroad field.

### **Purpose of the Study**

In order to better inform students going abroad, professionals in the study abroad field need to have a better understanding of the impact students have while completing community-based research projects and volunteer or service learning placements all while interacting closely with local community members. The purpose of the study was to examine reflections of the perceived impact returned students (alumni) had about their experience while abroad. Another purpose was to compare and contrast the viewpoints of local faculty and staff who have been involved with this program with those of the students. The aim of this study was to identify a list of recommendations to create a more collaborative, reciprocal and beneficial program for the host community. Additionally, the recommendations address ways in which to better inform and prepare students to be

aware of the impact, with specific recognition of the the power and privilege they have as Americans. I hope this leads to a more cultural awareness in their time abroad.

### **Research Statement**

The goal of this research projects is to gain a better perspective and gage the impact that students have while abroad specifically while doing research and engaging with local community members. The results of this research will help inform study abroad program providers with information to help them to make ethical choices when planning both curricular and extra-curricular components of programs. It will also allow professionals in the field to better prepare students to do work while abroad and help students to understand how their presences might impact on local communities.

### **Research Question**

This project's primary research questions is:

How do the perceptions students have of their impact on local communities while studying abroad compare to the perceptions that local community faculty and staff have of the students' impact?

Additional sub-questions to answer in the research are:

How can students and staff engage local community members to better understand the community's wants and needs?

What preparations are students getting for interacting with the local host community?

Who benefits locally from the presence of American students?

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Internationalization is an important component of many universities, and is stated in their mission statements, with study abroad growing over 150% in the past decade (Schroeder, Wood, Galiardi, & Koehn, 2009). As McCabe (2001) states, “internationalization seems to suggest cooperation and understanding between two countries/culture, whereas often the term globalization has negative connotations that conjure up fear of neocolonialism and cultural homogenization (p. 139).” Therefore, study abroad students and providers need to be aware of the impact they are having in choosing to send students to study overseas for cultural immersion, educational opportunities and service learning experiences. In an increasingly globalized world, international service learning organizations and projects will continue to grow because these experiences allow students to immerse themselves within a community and or/organization along with contributing to the local community (Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004). Study abroad will continue to grow and providers will continue to look for new and unique locations to help students have a different experience; most of these locations will be in developing countries.

As previously stated, the current research focus on study abroad is on the individual student with emphasis on learning assessment and outcomes as well as the long-term impact of study abroad on the student’s career and life paths. There is little

research on the impact of study abroad students on the host community. In turn, the closest research comes from studies anthropologists do on the effects of tourism. Other themes emerged from similar research including the responsibility of students abroad; challenges faced by students and faculty; reflections on themselves and their own culture; issues of power and privilege and how experiential education is shaping service learning and volunteer programs. Two articles specifically addressed recommendations for consideration by students, institutions, and study abroad providers but neither focused on long-term programs.

### **Tourism**

Research on responsible travel comes primarily out of anthropologist's research on tourism. Often critical of tourism, especially in developing and third world countries, anthropologists have highlighted the negative impact that tourists, especially Western tourists, have on the economic, social and cultural effects of the local communities they visit. (Schroeder et al, 2009). As Barbour (2006) states "tourism often injects the wasteful habits of a consumer culture into a society with unmet basic human needs." Alternatively, tourism is a large economic part of many communities across the world. The consequences, both unintended and unexamined, need to be considered by all who go abroad, whether for pleasure or study (Schroeder et al, 2009). This closely relates to study abroad because students are coming to live in a community for a period of time where they depend on local community members to provide services for them such as accommodation and meals.

Study abroad providers are beginning to consider the role of student tourism on their programs. Study abroad can offer a model for responsible tourism by providing benefits to the host communities as well as help students to “deepen their moral sensibility, elicit their compassion, arouse their sense of injustice, and sharpen their understanding of world problems” (Barbour, 2006). Additionally, traveling to developing countries can help students have a better understanding of themselves and begin to examine the American values concerning consumerism and individualism (Sumka). In Gmelch’s (2004) study of student’s travel while on a study abroad program in Europe, he found that students were becoming more independent because they had to ask questions and talk with local people in order to figure out where to go and how to get there. Tourism seems to be a central part of study abroad, as well as a contentious point when thinking about the impact on the local host communities.

Another theme that emerged from the current literature is the responsibility study abroad providers and institutions have when considering the impact their students have. It is clear that the host communities should have control over if and how students are part of their communities, but this isn’t always taken into consideration on the part of the administrators (Schroeder et al, 2009). All participants should be asking, “how am I helping or harming the community that we are in?” (Barbour, 2006).

In terms of benefits to the community, little research exists on how the students make a positive impact on the community. In focus groups with students who were on a service-learning program, students also felt their presence in the local community helped to change the negative stereotypes of Americans (Schroeder et al, 2009). As stated

previously, there are economic benefits to the host communities. Out of this emerges the challenges that students have cited while interacting with the local communities; most of which are an issue of inadequate preparation to be culturally sensitive and understanding of a different culture. Language differences were stressful for students while in the local communities (Tonkin and Quiroga, 2004).

### **Reflections**

In studies of returned students and faculty who participated in short term (less than 4 weeks) service learning programs, Tonkin and Quiroga (2004) and Schroeder et al (2009) both concluded that the returnees were unaware of the negative impact they might have had on the communities before leaving but were aware and reflective of this after they returned. The studies also found that, because of their experiences abroad, they were much more conscious of themselves as Americans as well as developed a more critical perspective on American values, norms, behaviors and beliefs (Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004). Another important conclusion was that the students began to identify as the 'other' while abroad because they were deeply immersed and perceived as the 'other' while abroad allowed for cultural reflection and confrontation of their own ethnocentrism (Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004). Additionally, participating in a service learning experience allowed the students to interact with an issue they may have only read about in a textbook. They were then able to translate their knowledge to real world experiences and this enhanced their role as a global citizen (Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004).

To follow up on the experiences of past students, issues of power and privilege were prominent in their reflections. As stated by a returned student Zemach-Bersin

(2008) “although the world may be increasingly interconnected, global systems of inequality, power, privilege and differences are always present.” This student began to recognize her presence within the local community in Tibet while participating in a study abroad program and her article focuses on the privilege she had and how that played this played into her favor. In Tonkin and Quiroga’s study (2004), students reevaluated their western cultural values and reflected upon their own American-ness but also the admiration the students felt because being American was “problematic and bothersome” (Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004, p. 141). In addition, Gordon (2010) states that “ascertaining local vies is not easy, because the large global power differential can play a significant role in creating a false consciousness among travelers: the often naïve illusion that we got on well and popular among the local people” (p. 42). This emphasizes that there is an unequal power relationship between the local community and tourists, and in this instance, study abroad students.

Several recommendations did come out of the studies. Firstly, Lutterman-Anguilar and Gingerich (2002) said that colleges and universities need to ask ethical questions as to whether or not they are doing more harm than good and not engaging in acts of cultural invasion (p. 22). Schroeder et al (2009) echo this by proposing that knowledge of the community is imperative in analyzing and minimizing the negative impacts that students can have on the local community. The implementation of study abroad programs involves communication and dialogue with local community members so that it is, in fact, mutually beneficial for all (Lutterman-Anguilar & Gingerich, 2002). Lastly, establishing long term commitments to one specific community and/or cause

proves to be largely beneficial for the communities as well as provide a partnership that can be built on and improved upon (Schroeder et al., 2009).



## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

To better identify the potential training and resources needed to prepare students to work with local communities and understand their own impact, it was essential to talk directly to students who participated in a study abroad program that incorporated community-based research projects, as well as those that had extensive interaction with local community members. To complete this research, conducting semi-structured interviews with the local faculty and staff helped me to better understand the perceived local opinions of the students and the work they do. To gain background information on these programs, orientation schedules, reports and feedback submitted by visiting faculty directors were reviewed. The goal in collecting all this information was to help to identify where the gaps were and what can be done to make the experience more mutually beneficial for all people involved.

#### **Program Background**

I choose to do a case study on a semester long program in Tanzania, coordinated by a small program provider who operate about 15 programs worldwide. The organization operates small programs that cater to the liberal arts tradition. Programs emphasize community-based research and language learning components. The program is considered a hybrid program because it is based at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) for the beginning and end of the program. While at UDSM, students take three

courses taught by local faculty – Human Evolution, Ecology and Kiswahili. The middle part of the program consists of an independent study project course, where students spend six weeks at a rural field site living and conducting community-based research projects. Student research spans across disciplines including anthropology, archaeology, ecology and biology. During the time in the field, students are encouraged to immerse themselves in the local community and take advantage of existing partnerships that have been cultivated over the years of the program.

### **Participant Interviews**

A qualitative research approach was important to this research as it gave me the opportunity to have extensive conversations with a smaller group of participants about their experience and reflections. I used a semi-structured interview layout in order to allow for follow-up questions based on the interviewee's responses but to still provide a structured outline for what I wanted to cover throughout the conversation. The advantage of using this format was that I was able to further explore themes, such as tourism, that continued to come up in the interviews.

I was able to interview five alumni who did the program between 2008 and 2013. The alumni interviews were based on a set of nine open-ended questions and conducted using Skype. Students were recruited from a post on an alumni Facebook page and contacted me on my personal email if they were interested. I began the interview asking each student what his or her community-based research project was and then tried to get additional information on how they thought their personal research had benefited the community. In terms of gagging preparation, students were asked about orientations and

cultural preparations they did before and during the program. I then wanted to talk to to alumni about, after having time to reflect on their experience, about how they thought their presence impacted the local host community. I aimed to get their advice on whether or not there was anything that could have been done differently to help prepare for the experience and/or make their experience more mutually beneficial. Because of the substantial anthropological research on responsible tourism, I want to ask alumni if they felt like tourists or part of the community. I also pushed them to think about ways in which they wished they would have been prepared and any advice they would give to future students to better prepare them for their cultural experience. In sum, I was trying to get reflections on their experience and how it related to the community.

To compare and contrast, I was able to conduct three interviews with five local faculty and staff who have worked in Tanzania. In these interviews, I asked questions about what they have done to help students prepare for their time in the community. Specifically, were there any lectures and/or activities that they led to get students to think about their interactions with local community members? I asked questions about how they saw the students dealing with cultural adaptation and immersion. The interview also addressed any issues or concerns the local faculty had with the students being out in the community. To align with the student interviews, I also wanted to get their opinions on tourism and how the program and student might be seen as tourists or not. Lastly, I asked what other preparations they might suggest. Having the viewpoints of the local faculty and staff are helpful because it allows for a local perspective on the American students.

The local faculty and staff are able to provide their thoughts on their own culture and how Americans are perceived, especially in the context of this program.

### **Procedure**

Upon obtaining IRB clearance through Loyola University (Project #2330), I was able to draw on personal relationships that I have developed while working with both students and faculty on the Tanzania program. As previously stated, I posted a request on my behalf on the alumni Facebook page and asked interested participants to contact me on my personal email. I communicated with each participant and arranged for a time when I could contact him or her via Skype. All participants were provided with the consent form either by email or in person and then were asked to give verbal consent before the interview began. Each interview was recorded using a software built into Skype. In addition, two of the local faculty were interviewed on site in Olasiti, Tanzania while I was doing a site visit. Those two interviews were recorded using an iPhone recording memo application and transferred to my laptop.

The interview results were anonymous with no identifiable information recorded. All interviews were saved on my hard drive as interview #1, #2, etc. No compensation was given to any participants. All participants were given the opportunity to ask questions at the end of the interview. Several participants were interested in the goal of the research and asked to read the final research with the recommendations.

Once all the interviews were complete, the interviews were transcribed into Word documents. I used emergent theme coding in order to identify patterns, themes and concepts from the interviews. Additional documents, including program director reports

and orientation schedules, were consulted to provide additional details about cultural sessions and student preparation before and during the program.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As Tonkin and Quiroga (2004) experienced in their study, one of the major considerations in conducting interviews and focus groups was the “observer effect”- the desire of the interviewee to tell the interviewer what they think they want them to say. Although I do not think this occurred during my interviews, students and local faculty and staff did know me prior to the research, their responses could have been biased. But, interviewing people who knew me might also have contributed to the level of trust they had with me to be open and honest about their experiences. I made it clear at the start of each interview that this research was separate from my work as an administrator and would never affect the working relationship we might have given our positions.

This research is a case study of one specific program and there was a limited sample size. Although I do feel that the students gave answers that represented the majority of students and faculty of this particular program, it cannot be generalized across all study abroad programs. The research can give insight into issues related to the impact of Americans abroad for educational purposes, specifically in a developing country.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

The eight interviews provided insight into the experiences of students conducting community-based research over the course of a semester while studying in a foreign country. The alumni interviews were complimented by the reflections of local faculty and staff. Interpersonal and cultural differences were apparent but almost to be expected when moving between two very different cultures. The alumni of the program had varying past travel experiences - for two students, going to Tanzania was the first time they had left the United States. Previous travel experiences contributed to their preparation, openness and adjustability to a new culture. The local faculty, one of which was American and the other two Tanzanian, had extensive experience working with American undergraduates in Tanzania. Local faculty have direct daily interactions with students in advising and translating during the research process, so their perceptions are valued in that they have both experience with the local community, as well as with the students.

From the interviews, several important themes emerged. The awareness of the inherent implications of what it means being an American abroad was evident by both the alumni and the local faculty. Alumni reflected on their community-based research projects and the process they went through to collect data. They were able to reflect on how they thought their research had little to do with community interests. The alumni and

the local faculty identified ways in which students were prepared for their experience in Tanzania. One of the main on-site preparations was learning the language and how important it is to be able to interact with local community members. Lastly, interviewees reflected on the definition of a tourist. This question provided varying opinions on how they saw themselves as tourists at different points over the course of the semester. Overall, the faculty and alum had similar perceptions of what the students' presence meant to the local community.

### **Impact**

The original research proposal was to compare and contrast the differences between perceived impact by the students and local faculty while in the local community. While doing the interviews, I realized students were much more aware of how their presence impacted the local community than I had originally hypothesized. Alumni were aware of what it meant to be an American in Tanzania and the perceptions Tanzanians hold about Americans, especially in regards to wealth. One alumni commented on how she felt after interacting with some children in the nearby village saying “‘you people [American students] are so rich. You’re from America and can you help us pay for our education. We see you have nice things and you must have so much money.’ It was sort of an uncomfortable interaction and we weren’t sure what to do (Interviewee #5, personal communication July 17, 2014).” And one faculty mentioned that it would be helpful if the students and visiting faculty were able to financially contribute to the local schools (Interviewee #6, personal communication, October 24, 2014). Both comments represent ways in which the group was analyzing their daily interactions, specifically with regards

to the assumptions that Tanzanians have about Americans and money. This issue conflicts students and visiting faculty because they want to help but also do not want to be taken advantage of. Along with the review of director's reports from the past three semesters, it is apparent that the students and program are expected by the local community to provide financial assistance as a way of giving back to the community. Finding responsible, respectful and sustainable ways in which to help improve the community is important in study abroad.

One issue I expected would come up by the interviews was how study abroad programs might make an economic impact within the local community. The alumni mentioned going to restaurants, shops and markets in Dar es Salaam and Olasiti during the program. They did not make the connection of how their spending money might have impacted the community, especially in the small village near the research site. One of the local faculty mentioned that she paid local staff but didn't identify the specific impact that had nor the long-term impact this might have on the individual. But, during informal conversations with past students, comments had been made about how the local staff expected and relied upon their year-to-year employment with the program. I'm unable to conclude whether or not the alumni were aware of the economic impacts of the program or if my questions weren't clear enough to elicit such thoughts during the interview.

One of the goals of study abroad programs is to help students develop intercultural competence (Selby, 2008). As a study abroad professional, I also hope to foster cross-cultural interactions that help both students and local community members to better understand each other's culture. Local community members are interested and



curious about the students and want to know more about them, just as the students want to learn more about the local culture. This not only allows for a more reciprocal relationship, but it also allows for students and local community members to have a more authentic relationship. One alumni stated, “I remember someone gave us a good talk [when we were at University of Dar es Salaam] about treating people like people. Instead of just asking someone for directions, sit down and ask how their day is going, how is their family. And, I think that really stood out to me as far as understanding people and appreciating them (Interviewee #5, personal communication, July 17, 2014).” The importance of being respectful and getting to know people is a very key component of the experience and helps to have a positive impact on both the local community members, as well as the students. Positive aspects cited by interviewees were they felt more connected to the country and the people, as well as able to better reflect on their experiences and their own personal values and biases.

### **Research Projects**

As previously stated, all students conducted community-based research projects while on the program and my research focused mostly on the reflections of these projects in Tanzania. The community-based research projects of the interviewees were either in anthropology or biology. Projects included interviewing local Masai about their understanding of malaria prevention; a survey of local women on pre-natal care; studying second hand clothing and how it perceived in the local community; a survey study of camel spider families in the national park; and observing zebras around watering holes in the national park. The research topics spanned disciplines and each student had varying

levels of interactions with the local community. The three anthropology students were able to spend time with local community members while doing interviews, as well as become close with their translators who were native Tanzanians. The biology students were interacting with local national park staff and guards, as well as the drivers of the vehicles in which they rode on a daily basis while collecting their data. All of these relationships, though different, gave the students a chance to interact closely with local Tanzanians.

An important aspect of respecting and being part of a community is reciprocation. None of the alumni suggested that their project was needed and/or wanted by the local community. The projects were conceptualized and proposed while the students were in another city (Dar es Salaam) thus they were unable to survey the local community about their wants and needs in regards to what the community interests were. Although all the projects slightly changed once they were on-site and students realized logistical constraints, the topics generally stayed the same. The changes in research were not necessarily a response to the local community needs or wants, but rather the realities of the location and the logistics of collecting information in a limited period of time. None of the students thought that their project gave directly back to the community but three interviewees did identify ways in which their research might have helped the local community have a better understanding of their research topic. Two alums did give presentations to the local community about their research – the pre-natal study and the malaria prevention study. Both commented that they felt the local community didn't have a full understanding of their research but were interested in what they had to say.

Although there were translators during the presentation, there might have been a loss of information or misunderstanding because of the translation. The alumni were also asked questions about other health issues because the local community members thought that because they were doing research on a medical topic, they knew a lot more about all health issues in the area.

One student thought that the best way for her to give back while doing her interviews for research was simply by taking time to talk with and answer questions from her interviewees about what life is like in America (Interviewee #6, personal communication, October 24, 2014). Another interviewee commented that it was important to talk about each other's lives so that Tanzanians had a better understanding of what America is actually like instead of what they see on television and movies (Interviewee #2, personal communication, June 11, 2014). Although neither of these students saw a direct correlation between their community-based research and how it benefited the local community, they were able to identify other ways in which their presence had a positive impact, even if it was removed from the academic components.

### **Preparation**

Alumni offered varying perspectives on how they were prepared for their experience in Tanzania, more specifically, their own cross-cultural preparation. One student was able to rely on knowledge she had gained in taking Anthropology classes on her campuses, specifically course that covered ethics in human subject research (Interviewee #1, personal communication, June 11, 2014). One student consulted with faculty on his home campus about their experiences leading the program. He thought this

helped him to have a better understanding of what it would be like once he arrived on-site (Interviewee #2, personal communication, June 11, 2014). Individual campuses play a part in pre-departure orientation as well but, depending on the campus, the pre-departure orientations range from no support to daylong workshops covering logistics and cultural awareness. The ACM also conducts a one-hour pre-departure webinar that covers the importance of students taking initiative on their cultural preparations but emphasizes more of the logistical aspects of the program. Three of the five alums remember one of the major points of the ACM webinar was the emphasis on the importance of being patient and flexible throughout the semester. The alumni felt that this was one of the most valuable statements they heard before leaving for study abroad especially in a culture that has a very different sense of time.

One of the local faculty (Interviewee #8, personal communication, January 8, 2015), explained the extensive week long orientation students participate in once they arrive in Tanzania. There are several local guest speakers including someone from the police department and the Dean of Students office who talk about cultural appropriateness for safety. Another presentation is focused on gender norms in Tanzania by a local professor familiar with American undergraduates. The local faculty felt this was the most useful preparation for students as it also talked about clothing and dress and how students might be treated based on how they were dressed. In addition, the local faculty member arranged for an activity that allowed for students to see first hand the differences in culture. The local faculty member encouraged students to dress in different ways throughout the week and then the group discussed how differently they were treated

based on what they had on that day. This helped students to recognize the how different the culture is from their own and gave students a safe venue for discussing cultural differences they were observing and experiencing.

The two other local faculty, both translators, stressed the importance of students knowing about local culture, specifically Tanzanian greetings and appropriate dress. More importantly, the cultural importance of extended greeting and showing respect in all aspects of one's behavior. For example, carrying on a several minute conversation where one asks about each other's family and well being before asking for anything else. This is an important cultural norm that American students are not accustomed to. They both mentioned that they help students, specifically the students who are interviewing local Masai, on etiquette when greeting elders and others in the small bomas or villages they go to. In the past, one of the local translators also had given short cultural talks about life as a Masai in the area. It was unclear how impactful these talks were because none of the alumni mentioned them during their interview. Ideally, it would have raised awareness about customs that students might have been unaware of before.

Three of the five alumni recommended that future students get more information on the history, culture and economics of Tanzania, ideally before arriving in country. Having this information would help students better understand some of the situations they may encounter and help to contextualize their experience. This information could also be incorporated into the Kiswahili course or another course that could be offered to students outside of the Evolution or Ecology courses.

## **Language**

The most consistent themes emerging from the interviews was how important knowledge and use of the local language, Swahili, is in helping students to feel comfortable in the culture. The alumni felt they were perceived differently because they did attempt to speak the language. During the first six weeks of the program, students take a language course taught by local faculty in the Kiswahili Institute. It's an intensive class, meeting each day (beginning the day after arrival) for four hours, including small group sessions with language tutors. Students do not gain fluency in the language but they are able to use the language in their daily interactions.

Although none of the alumni considered themselves fluent in the local language, the fact that they were trying to learn the language and using the language as best they could was important within the culture. One alum commented "it really helped for me to learn Swahili because the fact that we were trying to learn and trying to understand people on their own terms helped me a lot to not act like a tourist (Interviewee #5, personal communication, July 17, 2014)." After reflecting upon her experience, one student stated "definitely practice or try to learn Swahili because that is something I wish I would have worked harder on (Interviewee #4, personal communication, July 14, 2014)." A third alum stated "learning Swahili was interesting and really helpful. I felt like I could have some very, very basic conversations with people and that was a huge help and that made me a lot more comfortable interacting – just buying things in a store and having a conversation with people (Interviewee #3, personal communication, July 2,

2014).” Even the smallest attempt with the language helped students to feel more accepted and showed respect towards the local culture and people.

The faculty commented that one of the most important parts of the language class is to teach students about greetings and the importance of eye contact in Tanzania as these are one of the most important, and respectful, ways of communication (Interviewee #8, personal communication, January 8, 2015). This is not only important in daily interactions at shops and markets, but also in the field when alumni were conducting interviews for their projects. Although the students do use translators for their interviews, in order to establish trust with their interviewee they must create a personal relationship with the interviewee through these extended greetings conversations. For alumni, using the local language, even if they were using it incorrectly, showed a level of interest and respect that the local community members appreciated.

### **Tourism**

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was how the interviewees viewed tourism and how they likened themselves to tourists at different points throughout their experience in Tanzania. The faculty had similar views about tourism. “There were times when I felt like a tourist especially in Zanzibar. It was Ramadan, and I’m a white, Jewish-American traveling with a large group. Besides that, whenever we were driving around the park in a large group. But, when I was in Tarangarie [field site], I felt more connected to the place (Interviewee #2, personal communication, June 11, 2014).” Another student commented “we went to a market on the first day and I remember we had this big bus and we all got off and I felt very much like a tourist (Interviewee #5,

personal communication July 17, 2014).” Overall, alum saw themselves as tourists when they were moving in a large group. One of the faculty had similar views of tourists saying “tourists are people who are moving from one place to another and seeing things, but not interacting with locals (Interviewee #7, personal communication, October 24, 2014).” Understanding the definition of a tourist helped the alumni to be aware of what tourism means in Tanzania.

The alumni were able to recognize that they were tourists during their time in Tanzania but that as the semester went on, they were able to consider themselves less of a tourist or outsider. “A lot of times I did feel like a tourist, especially because you stand out so much; but I think that everyone tried hard to meet a lot of Tanzanians and become friends with them. I think that is helpful in making it so that you’re not like a tourist (Interviewee #4, personal communication, July 14, 2014).” Another alum felt that the fact that the group was forced to take public transportation and find their way around for an extended period of time helped them to feel less like a tourist (Interviewee #3, personal communication, July 2, 2014). Additionally, learning and using the local language was extremely important in helping to differentiate being a tourist rather than trying to fit in with the culture (Interviewee #5, personal communication July 17, 2014). Although the alumni could never be considered “local” they did their best to assimilate to the culture.

The difference between study abroad students and tourists provides interesting insight into how study abroad students quickly move between feeling like a local to being a tourist again simply by being in a different place or with a larger group of people. Faculty commented how it is important that the students learn about the culture and



interact with local community members. These two attempts help to make the differentiation between study abroad student and tourists. Although there will always be aspects of study abroad that can be identified as tourism, how study abroad students are viewed, and view themselves, is an important consideration.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

As study abroad continues to grow within higher education, the importance of responsibility, on behalf of universities and program providers, is imperative. Perceptions didn't necessarily differ between the local faculty and the student alums. Alums had much more awareness about their presence but lacked the background to understand how their individual community-based research project could benefit the community in which they spent an extended time. Throughout the interviews, it was clear that there were several positive aspects of student presence on local communities, but there is also some work to be done to better prepare students for their experience, as well as connect with the community about their wants and needs.

#### **Recommendations**

In an effort to help make study abroad a mutually beneficial exchange, I highlight four recommendations for universities and program providers to consider in order to help better prepare students for their experience. These recommendations will also engage community members in the experience so that they feel ownership in the program and are able to benefit from Americans studying abroad in their local communities.

#### **Background Information**

Three of the five alumni interviewed mentioned they wished they had had more background on Tanzanian history, culture and economy so that they were able to better

understand day-to-day lives of the Tanzanians they interacted with. This background knowledge can help contextualize their experience and understand the underlying cultural sensitivities they should be aware of. Part of the culture training is covered during orientation, as well as during their language course, but devising a set of readings for students to do before departing would help provide a basis for facilitated discussions throughout the semester. Simple misunderstandings could be avoided if students had a more comprehensive knowledge of the Tanzanian culture. With this background and facilitated discussion, students day-to-day interactions could be better analyzed and allow for a richer cultural experience.

Understanding that this could potentially be a huge undertaking, reading lists could vary depending upon the program site and focus of the program. For programs that are researched based, providing information to students about ethical research practices is essential. Additionally, obtaining recommended readings from local faculty and staff who are able to recommend readings that best represent their own culture, is important. A recommendation from one of the local faculty interviewed was to push students to access local newspapers before and during their semester so that they are aware of current events in the country (Interviewee #8, personal communication, January 8, 2015). Readings do not need to be academic in focus, and do not need to be extensive, but giving students the tools to better understand where they will live for a semester is imperative in making students aware of local issues and customs.

### **Cultural Talks**

Engaging local community members to speak to students about culture with visitors would help to loop in community expertise and allow students to better understand the local culture. These types of talks can vary and should happen throughout the entire semester, as opposed to only during orientation. Vital information – greetings, dress, and safety issues should be addressed by local staff at the beginning of the semester. Additional talks could be prompted by topics students are interested in or might stem from an experience that left a student puzzled or asking more questions. Bringing in local community members also contributes to the investment in the local community by showing that the students are interested in what they have to say.

### **Personal Awareness**

In the interviews, alum had mixed perceptions of what it meant for them to be abroad. One would hope that as students abroad, all would be able to immerse themselves in the culture instead of looking at culture and people from the outside as the “other.” But, in reality, I believe not all students are able to come to this point during their semester. Students must have a well-developed view of themselves, as a person, as a student, as a citizen of their home country, and as a guest in another country and/or culture. Fostering a community within the study abroad group can help to provide a comfortable and safe arena for these types of discussions to take place.

A possibility in helping students recognize this would be to facilitate discussions at the beginning and end of the semester to discuss “what does it mean to be an American abroad?” Obviously, students will have different self-awareness based on past life and

travel experiences, but it is extremely important that students recognize the implications of an American abroad, especially in a developing country. As one alum mentioned, there were several times where she felt uncomfortable to because people were assuming she had money to give them simply because she was a white American. It would be helpful to all the students if they were given the background as to why locals might assume this about Americans and how best to react to it.

### **Language**

Concluding from the interviews, it is fair to say that learning the local language is an important step to being culturally sensitive and responsible. Although it is unlikely a student will become fluent within a semester, learning key greetings and phrases that can be used in daily interactions is most important. As long as students are trying to use local language, even if they are struggling in a conversation, locals will appreciate their effort and feel that the student is more invested in the local culture. As part of language courses, students have had assignments where they need to go out into the community and use greetings in shops and at the market. The mention of host families in this research was limited, but to note, students in Tanzania, upon returning from their research in the field live with host families for three weeks. Host families provide additional language training, but often also can hinder the local language learning because the default language will be English and some host families also want to work on their English skills. In a way, this is reciprocation but in order to better facilitate language learning on both parts, an equal understanding as to the goals of language learning should be established and communicated early on in the semester. In other programs, language

learning comprises more of the curriculum. In other countries, it is essential that the local language be spoken because English is not widely used nor understood. Simply put, students who try to use local language in their daily interactions can better their proficiency as well as create better relationships with local community members.

### **Sustainability and Reciprocation**

The main motivation for my research come out of personal experiences where I had felt like the other when traveling and questioned my own reasons for traveling. I also began to question what the purpose of study abroad is and how American students are perceived abroad. Conducting this research forced me to consider the concepts of sustainability, reciprocation and awareness in study abroad programs.

Within the anthropological research in tourism, much consideration is made in how tourism affects the local community, specifically the economic impact of tourism and what happens when the tourists are not around anymore. I was surprised that none of the interviewees mentioned how they might have impacted the community economically while on the program. The amount of money that a group of 25 Americans abroad spends could be substantial considering this group stays in one very small community for four weeks. One faculty member did reference that the anthropology student interviewees did receive tea and sugar as a thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. When prompted, alum mentioned they did buy small items – chai, beverages and candy, in the local village but they didn't consider how this might have had a positive economic impact on the local business owners. Simply by being present in the community, there are economic benefits to the local community. Examples that I observed while on-site included employing local

guides in the national park, purchasing produce and other goods from the markets, buying fuel for the four vehicles, and paying campsite fees. This is a substantial investment in the local community and should be recognized.

How can study abroad programs contribute to sustainability in a community? For instance, in Tanzania, two of the alumni and two of the faculty spoke about giving materials to the local school near the campsite. One alumni mentioned that the students were encouraged to bring with them schools supplies such as paper, pencils and crayons. The local faculty mentioned that the group purchased materials to build three desks to be donated to the local school. To them, this was a way of giving back to the community in which they were a part for six weeks. But, what happens to that school if the study abroad students don't come back one year or don't donate? Will the local school suffer because of the lack of presence of the American students? This issue is certainly something that, from an ethical standard, every single program should consider.

As part of creating sustainable and ethical program, program providers need to also consider who they contract with locally for support or services. Although study abroad programs want to move beyond tourism, there are still elements of the program that are considered tourism. For example, in the Tanzania program, the program provider contracts with a local safari provider to provide for the six weeks of services. Ethical tourism should be a standard in study abroad programs. The mission of such providers needs to be carefully examined in order to determine the providers' views of community development, environmental sustainability and local representation in the services. This can be extended to the contracts program providers use for transportation, tour guides,

meals and local staff. Consideration of local standards, in relation to tourism, are essential in creating sustainable and respectful programs.

Another issue in reciprocity in study abroad is to consider the wants and needs of the local community members. Students and visiting faculty should try to engage local community members in discussions about how the students, specifically the research projects, can better help to identify areas where the local staff want to better understand an issue and work together to identify solutions. This still allows for the students to have an academic experience but also helps students to understand the ethical boundaries and responsibilities in conducting research. Although the interviews I conducted did not address the thoughts on identifying the wants and needs of the community, I feel as though I have better insight into reciprocity and how this might be incorporated into research projects given the discussions I did have.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Research on study abroad has recently been focused on the impact of how the experience directly impacts the students, including learning outcomes and gains. Additional research needs to be done to examine how study abroad programs are or are not contributing to responsible tourism. The difference between tourism and study abroad is actually very small, so helping students, universities, program providers and local community members to understand the long and short term impact of study abroad on their communities needs to be researched further. Additional research in ways that the study abroad field can better identify the positive and negative impacts of their programs on the local host communities would be helpful.



## **Conclusion**

Overall, in conclusion of the study, it is apparent that the alumni and the local faculty have similar views on how the study abroad students in this particular program impact the local communities. Although their reflections did not address economic impacts, they were all somewhat aware of this concept but haven't thought about it to the extent that I hypothesized. Additionally, the reflections on their experiences did not emphasize reciprocity during the community-based research projects but all were eager to look at ways in which this can be achieved.

In order to facilitate partnerships within study abroad programs, consideration needs to be made regarding the impact of American students abroad. To cultivate reciprocity, all involved parties' interests should be taken into consideration. The importance of preparation and awareness on behalf of the students and faculty is key and should be incorporated into pre-departure orientation as well as an ongoing conversation during the entirety of the program, including significant time for reflection at the end of the program. Students being aware of their presence while study abroad will better enhance their experience as well as the interactions they have with local community members throughout the time they are living and learning in the community.

APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

## **Consent to Participate in Research**

**Project Title:** The American Student Abroad and the Perceived Impact in the Local Community

**Researcher:** Emily Gaul

**Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Noah Sobe

**Introduction:** You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Emily Gaul for a Master thesis paper under the supervision of Dr. Noah Sobe in the Department of Cultural and Education Policy Studies at Loyola University of Chicago.

You are being asked to participate because you are a student alum and or local faculty/staff of the ACM Tanzania program. This study seeks to examine the perceived impact of study abroad students while immersed in local host communities by gaining insight and recommendations from you. Because of your experience with the program, your insight is very valuable to the goal of this study.

Please read through this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the interview.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to gain insight on how students and local faculty/staff perceive their impact while studying abroad. Based on the research of this study, several recommendations will be made for better preparing students to think about their responsibility within the local community.

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to set up a Skype interview with me and answer approximately nine interview questions. All questions are optional and you can opt out at any time.

**Risks/Benefits:** There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research. All data will be kept separate from my work at ACM and in no way impacts our professional relationship.

**Compensation:** There is no compensation for participating.

**Confidentiality:** All responses will be kept anonymous and no identifying information will be used in the research study.

**Voluntary Participation:** Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are

free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.

**Contacts and Questions:**

If you have any question about this research study, please feel free to contact Emily Gaul at [emilyegaul@gmail.com](mailto:emilyegaul@gmail.com) or the faculty sponsor, Dr. Noah Sobe, at [nsobe@luc.edu](mailto:nsobe@luc.edu).

**Statement of Consent (verbal, during interview):**

*By agreeing to be interviewed by me, you are consent to my using your responses for the research project.*

*(Verbal consent)*

*I agree            I do not agree*

### **Local Faculty and Staff Guiding Interview Questions**

1. What is your role in the program? What responsibilities do you have for students in this program?
2. Did you or your colleagues work with the students on preparing them for interacting with the local community? If so, how?
3. What type of resources and/or preparation would you see useful for students to have to better understand the culture in which they are living and researching for six weeks?
4. In what ways do you see students interacting with the local community, either in their research projects or while living at the field site? Were there any situations involving students and community members, positive or negative, that you learned about?
5. How, if at all, do you see student's research benefitting the local community? Do you think their presence in Olasiti had a positive impact? How? Do you think their presence had a negative impact? How?
6. Do you view the students as tourists? Why or why not? What does it mean to you for students to be tourists?
7. Do you see students using power or privilege—intentionally or unintentionally—during their time in the program?
8. How do you think students can make a positive impact?
9. Looking forward, is there any advice that you feel is necessary to give students so that they are able to understand how their presence can be beneficial to themselves and the local community?

### **Alumni Guiding Interview Questions**

1. What research project did you conduct while in Tarangarie?
2. What preparations did you and the group have in terms of interacting with local communities during the research projects? During orientation? On-campus?
3. What types of resources and/or preparations would have helped you to better understand the culture in which you studied? How did the IRB process help these preparations?
4. Please tell me about your interactions with the local community, either during your research or while you were living in the field site.
5. Did you ever have the sense that you broke cultural rules or overstepped cultural boundaries?
6. In what ways, if any, do you think your research benefited the local community? What kind of impact do you think your presence had on the community? (Probe for + or – if participant doesn't mention).
7. Some people have likened students abroad to tourists. How do you define being a tourist? Did you ever feel like a tourist while in the field site? Why or why not?
8. Now that you are finished with the program, how do you think students (and staff?) in programs like yours can make a positive impact on the local community (without overstepping cultural boundaries)? How do you think your presence had a negative impact on the community?
9. Are you aware of the concept of white privilege? (if not, explain) How might this come into play while students are doing research in Tanzania? How do you perceive the power and privilege you had as an American while abroad?
10. Looking back, is there any advice you would give future students so that they can make the experience mutually beneficial for the local community, as well as themselves?

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## VITA

Emily Gaul began her career in international education in 2008. Prior to beginning her work at the Associated Colleges of the Midwest, Emily graduated from Beloit College with a BA in Sociology. While at Beloit College, Emily participated in a semester off-campus study program focused on Urban Studies in Chicago. After graduation, she had the opportunity to work in both Australia and New Zealand, as well as travel independently. These experiences helped her to understand the importance of sustainable tourism and cultural exchange.

Emily began her Master's in Cultural and Educational Policy Studies at Loyola University Chicago in 2011. She focused her coursework in Comparative and International Education. During the program, she participated in the study abroad program in Rome examining different study abroad programs in the city.

Emily currently is the Program Manager for off-campus studies. She works closely with students, faculty and international partners to offer an academically enriching study abroad program.